

A Tale of Two Birds

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About the Project

BNHS has been studying the Jerdon's Courser since August 2000. The Jerdon's Courser study was funded and sponsored by the Darwin Initiative, Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, University of Reading and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds(RSPB). The main objective of the Project was to study the ecology, distribution and to collect more information about this elusive bird.



Jerdon's Courser

PAINTING BY D.M. HENRY

My eight years stay in Andhra Pradesh for studying the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser was filled with several exciting moments watching wildlife. Although on most occasions it was either frustrating or depressing witnessing the mindless destruction of the critical habitats in some of the Important Bird Areas (IBAs). My study area was in Cuddapah district, but I could also explore other beautiful forested areas of southern Andhra Pradesh, during this period. In this article, I share some of my happy and annoying moments in two IBAs that have two important bird species – the Jerdon's Courser and the Great Indian Bustard. This article is not only about these two birds, but also about their habitats; as well as two important personalities who are trying to conserve these two birds and their habitats. Also, it is about the project titled, 'Large-scale habitat mapping and local conservation initiatives for Jerdon's Courser'.

These two birds have quite a few things in common. Both are globally threatened. Both are ground nesters. Both birds are very special for every person living in Andhra Pradesh, especially since the Jerdon's Courser is found only in Cuddapah, and Rollapadu is a stronghold for the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) population in Andhra Pradesh. Not only the birds but their habitat too is endangered. Both these birds have got a similar threat – their habitat is threatened by the Telugu-Ganga Canal.

In September 2000, my research guide Dr. Asad R. Rahmani introduced me to these two birds and their habitats during our short survey in Andhra Pradesh. I met two important persons during my visit. Mr. Aitanna, a forest guard at Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, who was instrumental in rediscovering the Jerdon's Courser and Mr. Adhisheshaya, a forest watcher at Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary, who was a field assistant for Dr. Rahmani and Dr. Ranjit Manakadan when they studied the GIB there in the 1980s and 1990s. Both these local men are extremely skilled, passionate, knowledgeable and good at locating their respective species in their habitat. They have



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been protecting their habitat for years and the experience speaks for itself.

During our survey on one of the nights, after about five hours of tiring search in the stony and thorny scrub jungle, Aitanna showed us one of the rarest birds in the world – the Jerdon's Courser; a special sighting for me since it was my first sighting. Besides the bird, Aitanna was also very special to me as he had been one among the fortunate few who had seen the Jerdon's Courser a number of times! After a while, I asked Aitanna, "How many times have you seen this species?" "I do not know", replied he in a matter-of-fact manner.

In the early period of my field work (2001-2003), the rate of encountering the Jerdon's Courser was relatively frequent. For instance, in the main Jerdon's Courser area, near Reddipalli, if I searched for a total of twelve

Careless vehicular trespassing into the fragile ecosystem destroys the habitat



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Aitanna - the forest guard instrumental in rediscovering the Jerdon's Courser

hours I would sight the bird at least once or hear its calls in the evening. Those were the golden days of my field work.

During those days I have experienced some of the rarest moments in my life, which I will treasure forever. One such memorable sighting was seeing a Jerdon's Courser in ample sunlight while it was calling (*Hornbill*, January-March, 2005). On January 1, 2002, I was in the main Jerdon's Courser area listening for its call. On hearing the call, I returned to our jeep satisfied, but nature had something more incredible in store for me. On my way back to the jeep, while scanning the ground my torch beam caught something move. I realised it was a bird as it squatted immediately after the light hit it. I knew that if I moved the torch beam away from the bird it would be difficult to locate the bird, which was just 20 m from me.

The bird was a Jerdon's Courser! Crouching immediately after getting exposed to a torch beam is a characteristic behaviour of the Jerdon's Courser; neither the Stone Curlew nor the Red-wattled Lapwing behave in this manner. In the crouching position, the bird is perfectly camouflaged, especially if it is on a stony ground and can be located only by the shiny appearance of its feathers. But this too is possible only if the bird is about twenty to thirty metres away and there is not much grass. As soon as I recognised that the crouched bird was a Jerdon's Courser, I decided to observe it



and was curious to know what it would do next.

I froze at that spot; for the next twenty-five minutes both the Jerdon's Courser and I were still. Then the Courser slowly got up to its knees and took nearly five minutes to return to its original standing posture. The torch light had dimmed by now as the battery was almost drained. Once it was almost dark the Jerdon's Courser was in front of me and all I could hear was chirping of crickets, a few nightjar calls in the distance and my breathing. The bird then fluffed its feathers and defecated. To get vital information about its food habits, I mentally noted the exact location so that I could collect the dropping later. Then came the best part of this wonderful episode, the Jerdon's Courser started walking slowly, along the torch beam, towards me, and when just about a metre away from my feet it stopped walking and looked up. I could see the confusion in its eyes when it shot straight up in the air and flew away.

I do not know what made that bird walk along the light source. Was it attracted to the small flying insects on the face of the torch? Was it because the illumination was dull? Or was it as curious as me, to learn what was on the other end? Only the Jerdon's Courser has the answers to these questions. For me, witnessing that twenty metre walk, which lasted for about a minute, was the best event in my life, so far. It was a perfect gift for me from the Jerdon's Courser that New Year.

Things were not routine for long. On my regular visit to the main Jerdon's Courser area one morning I saw a bulldozer digging a trench. Jerdon's Courser prefer scrub jungle with open area. At night they forage in the open area and during the day they presumably roost near or inside the bushes. So both these microhabitats are vital for the survival of this rare species. However, the newly appointed Forest Officer thought that these open areas could be 'developed' by planting some exotic tree species and digging trenches would help to increase the water table in that area. When I reached the site in the morning they had already dug half a dozen trenches, each one about a kilometer long and five metre wide. The



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bulldozer and its driver were very efficient and were accomplishing their work fast. So, though I was in a state of shock I knew that I had to act faster than them. Immediately, I went to the nearest forest office at Siddavattam and met the Officer-in-charge of the trenching work. He was polite and apologised for what was happening, but added that he needed permission to stop the work. I then went to Cuddapah to meet the Divisional Forest Officer, who was unfortunately not there. I tried to contact other officers at Hyderabad and informed Dr. Rahmani about the problem, who explained the situation to several higher officials at Hyderabad. In those days mobile phones were not common and the official in the field got the message to stop the trenching work only the next day at noon. By then it was almost all over for the existence of the Jerdon's Courser main area. I visited the site in the evening and heard the Jerdon's Courser as well as the sound of the bulldozer! This site has been a laboratory for me. Aitanna had shown me my first Jerdon's Courser here, I recorded



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The *Cajanus* sp. is a deadly weed that is suppressing the growth of the native grass species

and identified the call, and confirmed the Jerdon's Courser footprints by setting up camera traps here. But now, I would neither hear nor see the Jerdon's Courser in that place!

After this incident when I met Aitanna, I took him to the site and could see utter annoyance on his face, to him the place looked like a graveyard. He was not around when this tragedy occurred as he has been transferred from Redipalli. Had he been around this would

The Telugu Ganga Canal near Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, Cuddapah



Although the course of the Telugu Ganga Canal is diverted away from the Jerdon's Courser habitat the increase in the ground water level will change the scrub jungle habitat in the long run



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not have happened! He would have explained the importance of the place to his Officer. He had been sighting the Jerdon's Courser in this area since the day he had rediscovered this bird. It took me nearly a year after this tragedy struck to find them again near the main Jerdon's Courser area. Although they are using places adjacent to the main Jerdon's Courser area I have not seen or heard them in the place they once frequented, till date.

If a small trench can have such an adverse impact on this bird what will happen if a canal 100 m wide and 40 km long, cutting across the entire suitable habitat of this bird, is built? Timely intervention by several conservation organisations and individuals resulted in redirecting the canal away from the main Jerdon's Courser area, as well as securing about 3,000 acres of vast stretch of scrub jungle habitat around Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary. Although we have saved the habitat of the Jerdon's Courser, the main challenge now is to make sure that it is managed properly for the future of the bird.

Aesthetically, a scrub jungle may not be very appealing to a common man. But anyone will fall in love with the grasslands of Rollapadu

Wildlife Sanctuary, especially if they visit during monsoon; it is one of the most beautiful places on this Earth. I was there eight years ago on a pleasant September evening. The sun was setting and its rays reflected on the blades of grass. It appeared as if I was standing in the middle of a vast golden carpet. The place was filled with chirping and resounding calls of Zitting Cisticolas and Rain quails. Montagu's and Pallid Harriers were flying gently.

I was with two individuals who are passionate about grasslands and the Bustard, Dr. Rahmani and Adhisheshaya. They had shown me my first Great Indian Bustard at Rollapadu. It was a male standing in a slightly elevated area in that gently undulating terrain and displaying, producing a deep booming call, an amazing sight! Adhisheshaya spotted two females bustards around that area and one Lesser Florican. We had also seen a pack of wolves. I could hardly contain my happiness! There was one more pleasant surprise when we got back to the guest house near the Sanctuary. There was a female Great Indian Bustard chick, which has been raised in captivity. Adhisheshaya has been taking care of her ever since nearby villagers brought her



there when she was about a month old. He feeds her regularly with grasshoppers and other insects, and also takes her for a walk to the nearby grassland patch.

Next morning we visited a few other parts of the Sanctuary. After the excitement of the previous evening we witnessed some unpleasant things. There was a watch tower constructed amidst the grasses. Palm saplings were planted inside the grassland! I could see the sadness and frustration on Dr. Rahmani's face. He said, "You will see the consequences in coming years". His words stand true; since that visit in 2000 I have been to that place almost once a year till 2008.

My first alarm was when I re-visited in 2002. Collecting bird footprints in Sri Lankamaleswara WLS for my Jerdon's Courser work has made me a 'footprint freak'. I carried a bag full of fine soil to deploy a track plot to get a footprint of the captive Bustard. But was very disappointed and depressed when I learnt that she was killed by stray dogs. Although my visits were only for a day or two I sighted bustards on four of my eight visits. All my sightings were up to 2005. After that I

started witnessing the gradual deterioration of that beautiful grassland habitat.

For constructing the watchtower and planting exotic tree saplings the authorities had to take heavy vehicles inside the grassland. Tourists were allowed to walk and drive inside the grassland to reach the watchtower; this took a heavy toll of the delicate grassland ecosystem. By 2006, the entire patch of grassland invaded by exotic weeds. During the same trip I heard from Sanctuary authorities that they had received an egg of a Great Indian Bustard, laid in a farm. It came from villagers, of a nearby village, who had kept the egg in their refrigerator for two days!

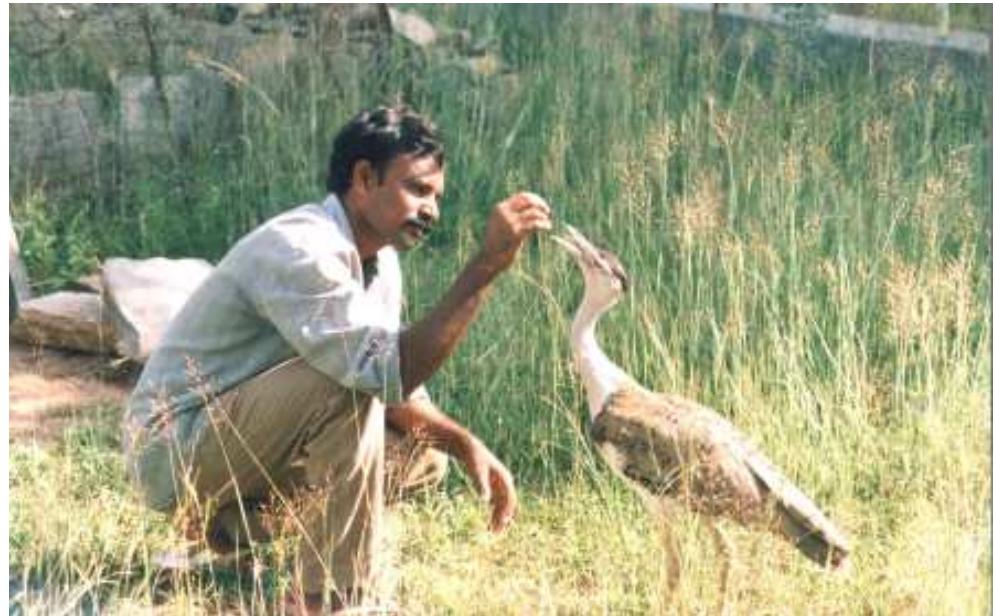
In 2007, things were much worse. There was a percolation pond inside the grassland. A large area of grassland had been cleared and ploughed. And more depressingly, there was a report of an abandoned egg of the Great Indian Bustard. This had happened probably due to the disturbance at the nesting site by people. During my recent visit in September 2008, I was shocked to see that nearly 40 ha of the grassland had been cleared. When I questioned authorities I got an interesting



Interesting representation of the Great Indian Bustard, Florican and Courser created by the Forest Department



Adisheshaya, a forest watcher who has been taking care of abandoned Bustards and the Rollapadu grasslands since a long time



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answer; "instead of removing the exotic weeds manually, to make things quicker, we used bulldozers." I can't express my reaction at this mindless act. Earlier in this article, I had mentioned that the grasslands of Rollapadu are one of the most beautiful places on this Earth. Not anymore. The problem has now gone beyond the Sanctuary. The major crops around the Sanctuary are ground nut and sunflower where the bustards forage and nest. The Telugu Ganga Canal, which passes close to the Sanctuary has been widened recently and it may lead to change in crop pattern in coming years.

During his visit to Rollapadu in 2000, Dr. Rahmani, after witnessing the mismanagement of grassland, wrote in the visitors' notebook that, "... Karera Wildlife Sanctuary was established mainly for the Great Indian Bustards in 1981. Now it has got DFO, Forest Rangers, Foresters and Forest Watchers, but there are no Bustards..." He clearly recommended in his 'Need to Start Project Bustards' (for details visit: www.bnhs.org) that "habitat protection and proper maintenance of core areas could help in increasing bustard population; and support from the local population is imperative since the bustard lives in marginal agriculture areas." These words have to be followed as a gospel by the

authorities to save the only remaining population of the Great Indian Bustard in Andhra Pradesh. If not, the bustards in Rollapadu will go the way of the bustards of Karera.

Habitat alteration and destruction is a major threat for many birds around the world. Scientists proved that even a subtle change in the habitat will have an adverse effect on survival of birds. Scientific studies show that extinction rate is higher for species that occur at lower elevation since their habitats are easily accessible and prone to various anthropogenic activities. For example, it is very easy for a bulldozer to wipe out about hundred hectares of scrub jungle or grassland habitat in a day. What can we do to stop this and save these precious habitats from further deterioration? It is not possible for a birdwatcher or a nature enthusiast or a scientist or even an activist to stop this single handedly. We need a collective effort from politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and locals to tackle this issue effectively. 



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